

Britain's Guardian embraces the Tories' austerity measures

Chris Marsden
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On July 1, 2008, this writer drew attention to the broader significance of the support extended by prominent writers for the *Guardian* and its sister paper, the *Observer*, to David Davis, the Conservative MP for Haltemprice and Howden.

The *Guardian* is the leading representative of what passes for a liberal-left media in Britain. Davis had resigned to force a by-election based on opposition to the Labour government's extension of detention without trial for terrorist suspects to 42 days. A number of *Observer* and *Guardian* writers broke ranks with the newspapers' usual support for Labour's pro-business agenda and embraced Davis, of which the most unabashed was Henry Porter, who ran a blog for the newspaper, "Liberty Central".

The issue in dispute in the pages of the *Guardian* went "beyond simply deciding whether or not to register a protest against 42 days detention and other measures undermining democratic rights," we wrote at the time. "What is being fought out is whether to remain loyal to Labour while nodding occasionally towards the Liberal Democrats, or to transfer political allegiance to the Conservatives."

Porter declared in the June 29, 2008 *Observer* that *the leadership of the fight to defend democratic freedoms* "must be the Tories"—praising party leader David Cameron as "more libertarian than his friend, the shadow Chancellor George Osborne" and Dominic Grieve, the shadow home secretary, as "solidly libertarian".

This was politically significant in that Cameron and a future Tory government would "have need of apologists and converts with a vaguely leftist background if they were to have any chance of maintaining a grip on power."

A separate piece, "What does British Tory MP David Davis stand for?" (July 22, 2008) explained that those who portrayed Davis as a champion of civil liberties conveniently glossed over his support in the 1980s for the extension of the anti-union laws enacted by Margaret Thatcher in order, as he wrote in 1989, to outlaw strikes in both the "combined state sector and recently privatised monopolies" that "can effectively bring the country to a halt".

Two years later, how do things stand following the coming

to power of the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition?

The initial rightward shift in the liberal media has become a virtual stampede. For his part, Porter has consummated his earlier love affair with the Conservatives while making clear that his lauding of their supposedly democratic bona fides is married to his agreement with their ?80 billion plus cuts and other austerity measures directed against the working class.

He cancelled his "Liberty Central" blog on the basis that the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were largely implementing its agenda, writing on July 11, "This coalition is proving to be a champion of common sense". He noted how "at a party last week" his own praise for Home Secretary Theresa May and Justice Secretary Ken Clarke was agreed with by "a group of left-leaning friends".

Porter went on, "Despite George Osborne's budget, despite what we know is coming down the pike in the way of spending cuts, unemployment, the erosion of pensions and the possibility of a deeper recession, the coalition is popular, or at least tolerated, because the daily exercise of power seems more humane, reasonable and commonsensical than at any time during the last five years under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown".

After claiming, "We are watching something miraculously like a minor restoration," he made clear that it was not *despite* of the spending cuts, etc., but *because* of them that he is so enraptured with the Tories. "It may be illogical", he wrote, "but somehow the waste of taxpayers' money under Labour and the targeting of individual rights became almost the same issue in my mind ... I guess another person's money is like their freedom—it's never quite as valuable as your own."

Herein lies the key to Porter's open shift into the Tory camp, alongside others such as former *Observer* editor Will Hutton who is now an adviser to the coalition. This remarkably privileged layer is animated by naked self-interest. There is a desire to continue the years of self-enrichment of the upper-middle class made possible by a Labour government that was "intensely relaxed" about people getting "filthy rich"—but who now believe that the

recession necessitates meeting the working class head-on in the manner advocated by Davis in the 1980s and reiterated this month in response to the strikes by firefighters and London Underground workers.

For many other writers in the pages of the *Guardian*, support for austerity continues to be combined with a pose as people “of the left”. To cite just a few examples of this political species, Jackie Ashley wrote supporting Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith’s plans to force welfare claimants into compulsory full-time work-for-dole schemes.

Describing him as “a fundamentally kind man, passionate about the downward spiral caused by worklessness”, Ashley praised the fact that “Instead of howls of Labour outrage, there has been a nuanced response from Douglas Alexander, the shadow work and pensions secretary... This reflects a simple truth. If money cannot be shaved off the welfare system, and politicians are determined to protect the NHS and schools, then there is no credible plan for dealing with the deficit.”

But this was not enough, she argued—“it is only the first stage of a policy”. Rather plans for workfare should be embraced: “if people who are unemployed can be found socially useful community work to keep them busy while they are waiting for jobs during a period of very slow economic growth—or perhaps no growth at all—then that seems fair enough ... The left should never champion a welfare system which does not expect self-discipline or effort.”

Sunny Hundal chimed in with a November 9 piece, “Why the left cannot, and should not, oppose all government cuts”.

The “cry to ‘oppose all cuts’ is unsustainable for three reasons: tactically, economically and politically,” he insisted. “Tactically, we need to be *for* something, not *against* something”, he intoned, as if uttering some profound thought. “Economically”, there was the need to slash the deficit and take into account falling revenues “from the banking sector”. “Lefties can’t wish these figures away”, he wrote!

“Politically, a ‘no cuts’ stance is problematic too. For economic reasons there are lefties who would not join a hardline ‘no cuts at all’ movement. Me included. You could however persuade them to join a movement to defend frontline services at least ... Our job should be to persuade them that even if some cuts are necessary—the Coalition is going about it the wrong way.”

As for what constitutes the right way? As outlined by Polly Toynbee, this involves firstly relying on the Trades Union Congress and a supportive liberal media to stymie all opposition in the working class, and, secondly, deliberately sowing divisions between various sections of workers hit by

cuts.

On October 29, for example, Toynbee urged, “Firefighters, for the unions’ sake, work on bonfire night”. Insisting that “more empathic forms of protest must be found” than strikes, Toynbee declared that “strikes are irritants for working citizens”, even though “they are remarkably rare, falling from 29 million working days lost in 1979 to under a million now.”

Praising the real, as opposed to the perceived role of trade union leaders, she noted, “Strike ballots are mainly a negotiating tool: 90 percent of ‘yes’ votes never result in a walkout. Quietly, behind-the-scenes negotiations between unions and employers progress unreported, ending in peace ... The TUC’s Brendan Barber and Frances O’Grady are good ambassadors for the best unionism, but they have no power to stop, nor even rebuke, the macho strikers who may harm the rest.”

On November 5, with the firefighters’ strike duly called off by the Fire Brigades Union, Toynbee could turn her attention to then still upcoming demonstration against education cuts.

After noting “university cuts and the steep rise in student fees”, Toynbee urged that “government opponents should be asking themselves this: exactly how angry should we be about graduates paying more? Where on the indignation-o-meter does this belong?”

Claiming that “There is a limit to how many protests can be heard”, she concluded, “My own view is that graduates come quite low in that pecking order of pain.”

This is the essential political function of the nominally liberal media. The Toynbees of this world are the ideological fifth column of the bourgeoisie—the friends of the poor, of “ordinary working people”, whose patronizing embrace is in fact a stranglehold. They are falsely identified with “the left” only because they act as propagandists and advisers to the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy in efforts to suppress opposition to the government and the employers. The working class will stand a head taller, and be able to breathe more freely and act more decisively, once it recognizes these figures as a bitter political enemy.



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